

Coolness, Aesthetic Agency and Self-Construction

Emanuele Arielli*

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Abstract

The notion of coolness is connected with a broad range of different meanings that involve personal attitude, taste, fashion choices but also the recognition of uniqueness and authenticity by others. Moreover, coolness is related to self-confidence and imperturbability, as the usual historical reconstructions of its meaning show. In fact, the manifestation of subjective invulnerability is the expression of the general need to avoid any weakness that could challenge one's own autonomy through other people's gaze. In other words, the opposite of cool is to be excessively self-conscious, too dependent on the approval of others, and to be exposed and vulnerable to external judgment. Taking cues from these different meanings, this contribution will try to argue how the need for individual autonomy, social recognition and aesthetic fulfilment are closely intertwined in the practices of coolness, defined as acts of "self-construction" and, in particular, as aesthetic self-fashioning. From this perspective, it will be argued that even the most frivolous search for coolness as a stylistic attitude in everyday's aesthetic domain like fashion, consumption and lifestyle, plays a role in the dynamics of self-assertion and becomes an instrument for recognition and autonomy.

Keywords: Coolness; Self-construction; Autonomy; Aesthetic Agency; Sprezzatura.

* Università IUAV di Venezia (Italy); arielli@iuav.it

Introduction

In fashion, coolness is connected with a broad range of different meanings and connotations: it could mean to have style, to be original, unique and, most importantly, authentic, but also to be beyond or above the mainstream, to be confident (even overconfident) and at the same time detached and indifferent, to be against conventions, or to be transgressive, that is, to be someone that does not care much of other people's opinion, going his or her own way. Coolness, moreover, is often a state to which many strive through acts of "self-construction" and, in particular, through aesthetic self-fashioning. However, practices of coolness based on aesthetic self-construction concern not only the domain of fashion and consumption, but also, could be considered exercises of autonomy and freedom in their own right. A classic example of this are youth subcultures, and their oscillation between manifestly social and political struggles and seemingly more superficial phenomena of self-styling and aesthetic leisure. Fashion and coolness could be seen as irrelevant to issues of personal and social recognition, but, as it has been often stressed in the literature, even the most frivolous search for coolness as a stylistic attitude could have a role in the dynamics of autonomy and self-assertion.

Coolness and Personal Autonomy

For our purposes, we can focus on two very broad meanings of coolness: (a) coolness as being someone that is "right" (fitting, appropriate) in his aesthetic choice, is approved by others and is thus popular and successful. Celebrities and taste-makers that don't follow standards, but *create* them, are clearly "cool" since they are appropriate in their choices by definition, and (b) coolness understood as naturalness, absence of constraints, nonchalance and, in particular, imperturbability (confidence, aplomb, and self-assurance: that is, the inner state of someone who is *at ease*). Epitomes of coolness in this sense are the reluctant hero of (mostly American) popular culture, the smooth rap-singer, the lonely and independent cowboy or private investigator.

These two general meanings lead us to the idea that coolness is linked both with the issue of (personal) *freedom*, and with the *recognition* of one's autonomy as a subject. The two states of "appropriateness" and "being nonchalant," of naturalness and indifference, are based on the fact that the cool persona is not in a state of need, that she is already where she wants to be. In other words, coolness means being neither in a state of deficiency, nor of tension and striving toward something we would like to be, but we are not yet or we cannot be at all. It is interesting to remark that the notion of "ease" means both comfort (naturalness, from the Gothic *atzes*) but also, from the Greek *aisios* (*αἰσιος*), propitious, opportune, fitting. This is why it would be a mistake to think of coolness as linked only and exclusively to being different from others, being anti-conformist and unique: as Georg Simmel already pointed out in his famous essay on fashion, an individual can preserve his inner freedom without feeling obliged to exhibit himself as anti-conformist, but on the contrary taking on a conformist mask in his fashion choices. The relevant point is the inner freedom of the subject, which feels free to conform in order to preserve his personal autonomy. And coolness is exactly this: the manifestation of freedom, no matter how it is expressed, either by defiance of social pressure or by serene and voluntary acceptance of norms.

The main historical origins of the notion of coolness, as they have been notoriously investigated by several scholars,¹ are the Renaissance notion of *sprezzatura* and the African tradition of imperturbability. In this context, it is interesting to point out how exactly these origins mirror the core idea of individual (inner) freedom:

- (a) "Sprezzatura" was defined by Baldassare Castiglione in his book *Il Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) in 1528. The word means having an air of perfect naturalness or spontaneity, mostly acquired through discipline. "Sprezzatura" is the skill of concealing all artistry and making whatever one says or does seems uncontrived and effortless, while the opposite consists in the person who shows an overtly exasperated effort in his behavior: anxious affectation, artificiality, or awkwardness.

1. David Pountain and Dick Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

- (b) A second notable origin that has been suggested is the word “Itutu” from the Yoruba language of West Africa.² This word is often recognized as the source of the notion of “cool” within the specific African-American tradition, leading some commentators to see coolness as a primarily American phenomenon. “Itutu” literally means being cool and calm, as showed by the typical expression of the masks in the Yoruba artistic tradition. The Yoruba were heavily targeted by colonization and the slave trade for centuries and, according to Thompson, coolness became a necessary way to come to terms with the loss of freedom: a slave is victim of absolute control and lacks external autonomy, but can keep his personal dignity by showing internal calmness and imperturbability in face of his adverse fate.

Both “Sprezzatura” and “Itutu” express a particular kind of freedom: freedom as naturalness (I am what I am, I don’t need to make the effort to be something else), and freedom from preoccupations (I am indifferent and unaffected toward external judgment; I am carefree or, better, I don’t care).

There are specific reasons that explain why this attitude (nonchalance and imperturbability) is strived for in the abovementioned contexts: nonchalance and imperturbability are necessary means in the quest for autonomy and self-dignity in situations where power is limited. We find this both in the courts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in the condition of enslaved — but proud — subjects. The courtier is a new figure in the social landscape of modernity: he is cultured and sophisticated, but lacks the power of the rulers, and must compensate for this weakness with his wit and manners that signal his inner and spiritual superiority. Similarly, this is the attitude that every weak agent in a social hierarchy necessarily assumes in order to affirm (at least on a symbolic level) his dignity and spiritual strength. Imperturbability and nonchalance is the attempt by the (socially) weak to gain recognition as an autonomous subject and thus protect his own subjectivity. This attitude of detachment and unassailability is typical of all kind of outsiders, rebels, dissidents, minorities and social groups that neither have real power, nor possess the status of autonomous subjects on equal terms with the others member of society. Among the socially weak we could also count teenagers, since they don’t yet have real decision power in their life, and need to manifest coolness in order to be accepted by their peers, and as a means of protecting a still immature sense of self (what psychologist call a state of “narcissistic vulnerability”).

Shame and Objectification

Inner strength and symbolic invulnerability are aspects of the general need to affirm the (internal) sovereignty of the subject and to avoid any weakness that could challenge one’s own autonomy. And what typically challenges autonomy is risking being the object of other people’s gaze. In other terms, the opposite of cool is to be excessively self-conscious, too dependent on the approval of others, and to be exposed and vulnerable to external judgment. From a more specific perspective, we could say that the basis of the will to be cool is the *avoidance of ridicule and shame*, which could be seen as avoidance of objectification. In fact, we are not perceived as autonomous subjects if we don’t control or master aspects of our character or behavior, that is, if we are at the mercy of something outside our will. The link between objectification (both by other people’s gaze and by external factors that control us) and ridicule has been notoriously explained by Henri Bergson in his famous essay on laughter *Le Rire* (1900): “We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing:” that is, every time “something mechanical is encrusted (*plaque*) on the living.” If a speaker makes an emphatic gesture, it is not ridicule or comical. Since he is gesturing willingly, he is under control. But if the gesture manifests as a tic, giving us the impression that it was carried out beyond the speaker’s will, it becomes comical for us, and awkward for him. It is the element of inelasticity and loss of control in human beings that amuses us. Tripping while walking, having an open fly in public, or acting and moving in a fashion reminiscent of a marionette are expressions of loss of control — and this is precisely how clowns and comedians in movies carry themselves on stage. According to Bergson, we laugh (that is, we perceive something as ridiculous) when “we suspect that there is mechanism behind life. That diversion of life

2. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1984).

towards mechanism is the real cause of laughter.” Or, we could say, laughter is caused when we perceive a lack of freedom. And lack of freedom manifests itself, following Bergson, in at least two forms: when we are literally not in control of some behavior or when we are *unaware* of what determines it.

Concerning not being in control, and thus being mechanized, an example would be an individual showing himself to be completely dominated by his obsession with appearances. This person, therefore, is not free, as he is enslaved by this drive and, from the perspective of our discussion, is completely *uncool*. A specific case of humorous lack of freedom is also excessive *imitation* or repetition, the tendency to ape or follow trends and fads, which is a manifestation of the inability to behave autonomously. “This seems to me,” Bergson writes, “the solution of the little riddle propounded by Pascal in one passage of his *Thoughts*: Two faces that are alike, although neither of them excites laughter by itself, make us laugh when together, on account of their likeness.” Repetition, imitation, copying, and “doing what others are doing” are important principles of social coordination and cultural diffusion, but here Bergson highlights the downside: “The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself.” Excessive and mechanical repetition and similarity reveals a “deflection of life towards the mechanical,” which is the cause of laughter, but also, in our understanding, of uncool. As a digression, I would go so far as to say that this impulse to reject repetition is analogous to an essential aspect of modernity in the arts and in fashion, which are domains that are guided by an essential impulse to *neophilia*, that is the permanent desire for novelty, in which the *new* defines and gives value to any creative process. Nothing is more devastating for an artist (but also for an intellectual, a writer, or a designer) than to be told that his work is a copy of something else or that his ideas are not innovative, but that they “have already been done.” Following models and canons means in this perspective not being (creatively) “alive.”

The second manifestation of lack of freedom is being unaware of some characteristics that determine one’s behavior and appearance: a character is comic, says Bergson, when there is “some aspect of his person to which he is *unaware*, one side of his nature which he overlooks; on that account alone does he make us laugh.”³ For instance: sincerely priding oneself on sport skills that are completely absent reveals a deep lack of self-awareness. It is ignorance of his own weakness that makes the character funny in our eyes. From a general perspective, a dearth of self-awareness is a specific case of lack of control over oneself. This also explains how ridicule could be avoided by signaling self-awareness, for instance through irony. Intentionally and overtly flaunting one’s own comic incongruity in a self-ironic way protects the subject, not because irony allows him to overcome his weaknesses, but because it allows him to put himself above them from an observer’s point of view. He is not simply “laughed at” by others, rather he is “laughing with” others at himself and, therefore, he is dictating how he should be laughed at. If weakness is uncool, then the open exhibition of those weaknesses becomes a preemptive defense mechanism and a strategy of resistance against objectification: the individual signals that he is not ashamed to put his inadequacy and awkwardness into the open, he thus elevates himself above them and willingly makes them part of his identity (which is the basic strategy of all kinds of self-expressions based on overt “flaunt” or “posture,” like in Camp aesthetics).

Being the object of ridicule is the main source of *shame*. Concerning the inherent anxiety that is linked with this, we could in this respect turn our attention to J.-P. Sartre’s central claim in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) in which shame can occur wherever one cares about other people’s evaluation: “To feel shame is to accept the other’s evaluation; it is to identify with the object that the other looks at and judges. In being ashamed I accept and acknowledge the judgment of the other.”⁴ As Dan Zahavi puts it, “in shame, I experience myself as trapped in facticity, as being irremediably what I am (rather than as someone with future possibilities), as defenselessly illuminated by an absolute light (with no protective privacy) (Sartre 2003: 286, 312). In his analysis of the different ontological dimensions of the body, Sartre further argues that the gaze of the other disrupts one’s control of situations (Sartre 2003: 289).”⁵

3. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of the Comic* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2014), 23 (emphasis added).

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 287.

5. Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 314.

“I am the way the other sees me, and I am nothing but that.”⁶

For the Sartrean individual, the only possible attitude is to keep an inner distance from this unavoidable condition. To be the subject of other people’s gaze is an aspect of the facticity of existence, to recognize this facticity through an effort of self-determination is the manifestation of the transcendent component of existence. From a Sartrean perspective, the gaze of the other is an unavoidable condition which we cannot escape (confirming the impression expressed by some commentators of a mostly negative connotation of the mechanisms of attribution of the other’s gaze in French philosophical thought⁷).

Coolness is an attitude linked to our desire to avoid objectification and, at the same time, to our desire of being in control, that is, to be free. To avoid being seen as a “thing” (and thus being ridiculed) is the root of our desire for recognition as autonomous and free subjects. Now, this attitude reveals at least two components: the first one is the desire to be free from objectification (which basically means: being indifferent to the gaze of other); the second one is the desire to be free of affirming oneself, that is, being in control. Therefore, coolness could be defined in terms of “two kinds of liberty,” borrowing the classic notions of positive and negative freedom defined by Isaiah Berlin:⁸ (a) negative freedom could be expressed as “freedom from” external constraints and qualifications. First of all, this means being free from the objectifying gaze of others, so free from being judged as inadequate and imperfect. This would mean, moreover, to rid oneself of the desire, holding us captive, of being something different. In a sentence: being able to negate external models and to be indifferent and disinterested toward the judgment of others; and (b) positive freedom is the possibility to “be oneself,” a condition of self-affirmation in which one’s identity, status, and condition, no matter if they have previously been stigmatized or deemed as “uncool” or inadequate, are finally recognized as legitimate.

The Paradox of Nonchalance

This aspect of coolness, consisting in the negative freedom of being indifferent to external qualification and in the positive freedom to spontaneously do what one wishes, leads to the well-known “paradox of nonchalance,” the contradiction of a naturalness and spontaneity that is actual the product of effort and calculation, and the risks due to the difficulty of maintaining a facade of spontaneity in a condition of high self-control. In this perspective, coolness would paradoxically become an anxious state of tension in which the subject is always concerned, busy and in a constant effort of dealing with the problem of losing “one’s cool.” Attempts to appear effortless — that is, artificially being natural — touches a point that has also been debated around the essence of *acting*, of “playing a role” and putting on a mask. These debates concern the attitudes an actor should have on stage, not the behavior of a person in an everyday context, but are still relevant for the question of coolness as a product of (self)-construction. Two notable opposing views are those expressed by Denis Diderot in *The Paradox of the Actor* (1830) and, a century later, by Konstantin Stanislavski in *An Actor Prepares* (1936). Diderot saw the role of the actor as someone who is in *complete control* of his emotions and his role. Every choice in acting had to be calculated and precise in order to be effective. An actor should construct a model of the role he wants to play, and then imitate the model. The actor represents the character, but does not become the character himself. On the contrary, for Stanislavski acting concerns the creation of a character rather than imitation of a model. According to him, an actor should embody the character and eventually become the character himself. Both the perspectives by Diderot and Stanislavski require some degree of manipulation and deception: in the first case, by putting up a mask that deceives others, and in the second case by almost deceiving oneself through an act of complete impersonation. In this latter case, in order to better deceive others I have first to deceive myself: if I come to believe that I am fearless and outgoing, then I will be able to impersonate a bold character more naturally.⁹

6. Zahavi, 213.

7. Axel Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine europäische Ideengeschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2018).

8. Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

9. There are interesting studies of the dynamic between deception and self-deception in biology, like in animal mimicry. According to the ethologist Robert Trivers (*Deceit and Self-Deception: Fooling Yourself the Better to Fool Others*, London: Allen

The idea of freedom as naturalness and spontaneity should follow Stanislavski's advice of total self-identification in order to completely "act the part" without the effort of rational control. We have authenticity only in the total embodiment of a character, not in the controlled imitation of a model that does not reflect our identity. In contrast to that perspective, Diderot's idea of the perfect actor follows Castiglione's concept of "Sprezzatura:" concealed mastery and total control of a part. From this perspective, working on oneself (in order to be cool) means abandoning the idea of an unreflective authenticity. The practice of coolness is an active and constant self-construction in which we are free to negate every qualification that threatens our autonomy. If a constructed mask, instead of spontaneous naturalness, best suits our purpose of independence, then we should even be free from the constraints of our identity, running the risk, however, of a paradoxical self-negation.

Aesthetic Self-Construction as Strategy for Recognition

We can ask ourselves here if we didn't express a too cynical notion of coolness as a strategic self-construction for the purpose of social affirmation. This would be the opposite of an ideal of naturalness and authenticity in the original sense of "cool attitude."¹⁰ We would, on the contrary, associate this with inauthenticity, deception and hypocrisy, in the extreme cases with the behavior of social climbers and skilled mask-wearers (such as the notable cases of Anna Sorokin, Clark Rockefeller or Frank Abagnale — modern day impostors who, not surprisingly, were perceived by others as charismatic, natural, and engaging personalities). Artificial self-construction, moreover, could be seen as a typical expression of postmodern aestheticization of identity. Calculated effortlessness and strategies of deception may only matter in domains such as fashion and consumption, but they would not be seen as examples to follow in the struggle of self-affirmation for that "freedom from objectification" I discussed above.

Still, the dynamics of "coolness" have often been the battleground for recognition and autonomy in the field of every day's aesthetic domain like fashion, consumption and lifestyle. This is the case of all subcultural phenomena of the past, at least in their origins, as means of self-affirmation of the youth and of marginalized social groups. As we saw with the original notion of "Itutu," constructed aesthetic attitudes are a means of emancipation from a state of inferiority and inadequacy caused by other people's "objectifying gaze." Self-affirmation through coolness becomes a means of emancipation for any individual that is perceived as being far from dominant aesthetic and social ideals — too old, too fat, too ugly, for cultural minorities, for people with different sexual orientations — an emancipation that could be synthesized by the sentence: "It is ok — or cool — to be X". Today's self-staging in social networks, beyond the usual critique of hollowness and superficiality, is a particular case in which people have the possibility to build an image that is effective for their efforts to seek recognition and legitimation in the eyes of the others.¹¹

Moreover, aesthetic self-construction as a strategy of legitimation is, in some cases, more effective than other traditional means of direct social and political struggles for recognition. In fact, the problem of the conventional political fight for legitimation lies in the risk of the concerned party taking up a position of weakness and neediness. In the struggle for legitimacy, the weak part admits its position of deficiency in respect to others, who are in turn those capable of generously granting what is needed (recognition, rights, tolerance). Even worse, if legitimation is reclaimed by some third party, like activists trying to protect or give legitimation to some minority or weak members of society, objectification (even when social recognition is granted to them) would be a direct result. Moreover, political or conflictual self-

Lane, 2011), the skill of deceiving others often entails an evolutionary advantage, and the best way to pull off a deception without being exposed is to first convince oneself.

10. "The truest hallmark of cool behavior, according to cool-hunters, is authenticity" (Nick Southgate, "Coolhunting, Account Planning and the Ancient Cool of Aristotle," *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, vol. 21, n. 7, 2003: 456).

11. See Antonella Giannone and Emanuele Arielli, "Aesthetics Negotiations Between Conflicting Forms of Life: The Case of Modest Fashion," *The Culture, Fashion, and Society Notebook 2019*, ed. Simona Segre Reinach (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, December 2019), 63–90, for a specific view of these insights in the contemporary case of so-called Muslim "modest fashion."

affirmation is usually accompanied by intimidation, overbearing attitudes, resentment, misplaced pride, and tension due to the desire of one side to impose its will to the other side. I don't want to say that social and political battles are inadequate, they are of course necessary in important social issues and whenever the stakes are high. However, aesthetic self-construction has an advantage with respect to social or political fights for legitimation, since recognition through aesthetic (self)legitimation works by means of seductive strategies that are aimed to construct a public identity in which both positive freedom (I can be just the way I am) and negative freedom (I don't care what others say) are strived for and attained.

Of course, one should not forget the potential dangers of an excess of "self-sufficiency," as it could happen when, for instance, the coolness of the outcast's street life becomes too idealized and turns into an influential role model for other people, keeping them from getting away from their marginalized social condition. Coolness is an essential means of autonomy and social recognition through the construction of a seductive identity, but at the same time it should not become the cause of passive acceptance or even celebration of social disadvantage. Keeping this *caveat* in mind, self-construction by means of strategies of coolness can take the form of an active exercise of freedom, not only as a superficial and post-modern play of identities, but also, as the constant work of keeping oneself free from external attributions and objectification.

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Emanuele Arielli: Università IUAV di Venezia (Italy)

✉ arielli@iuav.it

He is Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the IUAV University in Venezia, Italy. He taught in Milan, Pescara and Berlin and has been a research fellow for the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and is Permanent Research Fellow at the Technical University in Berlin. His research interests include the connection between philosophical aesthetics and psychology, and the pragmatic and volitional aspects of human interaction and expression. Publications available at: <https://iuav.academia.edu/EmanueleArielli>.